

Blackford Fiddle Group – what is it is and how it came to be

Blackford Fiddle Group was formed in 1996 by Peter Cope, then Head of the Education Department at Stirling University. It was and still is an informal group although it has evolved from one based around children to one that sets out to be inclusive of all ages and all abilities. It started as a community group and while that is still the ethos, its members are drawn to it from across south Perthshire. With an active membership at any one time of around 40 people, and an extended membership of perhaps 60 or 70 and a much wider and larger diaspora it is active and busy and continues to meet weekly for practice sessions. Over the past few years it has played between 30 and 60 gigs each year, some where all members can play and others for the BFG Ceilidh Band. This level of activity shows the level of commitment and loyalty that the group attracts, not just from those who organise things but also from the adults and children who are its membership, who come to learn to play traditional music together for fun.

The aims and purposes of BFG

The aims of BFG are set out in the constitution. In summary it says the aims are;

- To promote the playing of traditional music on fiddles and other musical instruments in the local community.
- To promote inclusion by removing barriers to participation for all (especially those under 16) by loaning fiddles, providing opportunities to learn by ear and from music, to avoid any selection, to give a social context for playing and to promote peer support.

Members do this together, helping each other and they do it for fun and to entertain. The group meets weekly in Blackford and encourages people to join and it will lend them an instrument and provide support. BFG plays gigs for others, for fun, to raise funds and entertain.

The approach is built on the belief that anyone should be able to participate in making music, that the informal approach is no barrier to achieving high standards and that people should feel comfortable to play to whatever standard they choose.

The origins of this approach are very interesting. Pete himself suffered a serious stroke in 2006 from which he never recovered and which prevented his participation in the group. As well as being an unimaginably devastating event for Pete it was potentially a moment of crisis for the group. What came next amazed Pete and it amazed us all. The Group simply carried on, but I am jumping ahead. First, we need to hear Pete's description of the very early years. In 2008 he wrote the essay below. Nothing can really give a full sense of the fun Pete brought to the group or of his ability to inspire us to play, but his writing may give a feel for some of that. Pete brought his family, his academic life and his time to what became Blackford Fiddle Group. He disliked much in formal music education, and was particularly opposed to methods of selection that excluded so many children from the process of music playing. He certainly admired people who overcame the system and became musicians.

History and Philosophy Of Blackford Fiddle Group – The first 12 years

Pete Cope, November 2008

I thought it might be useful, or even mildly interesting to sketch out the history and philosophy of the fiddle group for those more recent converts to the cause, or for those who might be interested in starting a fiddle group of their own. The history is necessary because I want to make it clear that the group did not come about by working out the philosophy and making meticulous plans and implementing them. It was more like an evolution based on messing around, getting involved in traditional music and its culture and discussing how to do things with fellow musicians and members of the fiddle group, usually in between playing sets and sipping beverages. I guess the true origin of all the music that our fiddlers play would be my school violin teacher, John Clements, I'm not sure whether he'd be pleased or not, but although he was a classical violin teacher with all the baggage that that entails, he was a decent bloke and I'd like to think he'd be pleased.

Like most people who learned to play an instrument at school I didn't enjoy it and stopped playing the violin as soon as I left, got into listening to a lot of music (mainly classical) with the odd traditional LP. I learned to play the guitar at university by picking up tips from friends and painstakingly analysing the playing of people like John Renbourn, but I didn't think of the violin until my own children were about seven years old when I thought it would be nice if they could learn to play. As there was no instrumental tuition offered through their school and I couldn't find a private tutor, I reasoned that although I couldn't actually play the violin in any accepted sense of the word, I remembered how to play it. So, I could at least show them, without being able to demonstrate any expertise. This is an unusual approach, and could probably only work in the peculiar and particular context of the family. I bought a couple of half size violins, to give to each of my twins Emily and Sarah, and of course I started off doing to them what had been done unto me, i.e. giving them formal lessons, after a couple of days I realised that none of us were enjoying this so I started to try and play with them, rapidly moving to the idea of a string quartet where I played the viola, and I got my dad, a talented bloke, to make a small cello for my youngest daughter, Julie. I now cringe when I look back at this, skin crawlingly middle-class decision.

We only played music that we had heard on CDs (so the idea of playing by ear, at least to some extent was there from the start) but I still transcribed the music into conventional staff notation, or went to the library and borrowed the dots. We played every morning before the kids went to school, it although it sounded awful it was unbelievably good fun. This established the idea of practice by playing together, rather than as a solitary activity and I was just amazed at how quickly my children took off and became fluent players. We played a lot of Bach so they got used to playing fast, which paid off when he made the switch to traditional music. When we moved to Blackford, they played a bit at school impressing their teachers, because they were much better and much more fluent than

anything their teachers had ever seen, but one day they came home and said the school was having a ceilidh and would like them to play some ceilidh music. At that stage, I wasn't really into traditional music at all, but I vaguely remembered a reel from a Steeleye Span LP I possessed years before. I couldn't remember its title but I now know it was "The Bank of Ireland", I wrote out the dots and the twins learned it from the music, I worked out a bass part for Julie to play on the cello and we duly played it together. The first time we tried it I realised there was something missing and I went up to the loft, dusted off my old guitar and strummed along with them to my amazement, it sounded great, classical music needs to be played with precision or it sounds awful and we weren't up to it. Traditional music is less formal and it doesn't matter if the edges are a bit rough, we instantly converted to playing only traditional music, but we still played every morning, again, the twins made staggeringly fast progress and were soon able to play at ninety miles an hour. We started playing the odd gig, I then started to think and I thought two things. The first was that I would like to play the fiddle and if my kids could learn then so could I. I also decided to switch Julie from the cello to the fiddle and I learned alongside her, good fun, but depressing to be so dull and ploddingly slow in comparison with her. The second was if my kids could do it why couldn't other people's kids. I was, and remain, very dubious about the notion of inherited ability of any sort. And so in 1996, I started Blackford Fiddle Group.

I had absolutely no idea how it was going to work, but we got a grant of £280 from Blackford Community Council and some interested parents bought fiddles for their children, I can't remember how many children we had to start with but I think it was about ten. At that stage I was not encouraging parents to learn to play, although I did encourage them to attend to help me deal with the unwashed masses who have now matured into such talented, but still unwashed players. One such early parent helper was Jan who quickly giving in to talking persuasion to bring her guitar along and play with us. I had to rely on my children to help with some informal tuition and I remain grateful to them for their help in those early days. I was still wedded to the notion that you needed some kind of tuition to learn. I was also wedded to the notion that you needed to be able to read music, although it didn't take a great deal brain power to come up with the idea of colour-coded music to reduce the obstacle that reading music places in the way of so many learners of musical instruments. It remains a mystery to me why the formal sector has not developed more inclusive techniques, it really isn't very hard to do.

The idea of learning by participation came later as I talked to more people and became more familiar with the culture of traditional music, from which we imported the emphasis on and value of playing by ear. Fairly early on it occurred to me that getting parents to play along might be helpful. First, Jan came along with a guitar, and then Andrew learned to play the guitar so he could play at home with his estimable children, Aly and Freya, both now expert fiddlers. Then he let slip that he had learned to play the flute at school and I nagged at him for about six months to bring the flute down to the group. Bravely he did so. It was a classical flute and he hadn't played it for about twenty years and he had to learn to play by ear and to expose himself to the possibility of ridicule. How I wish I'd taken more advantage of that opportunity. Since then Andrew has become somewhat obsessive and has a large

collection of whistles and traditional wooden flutes and is one of the stalwarts of the fiddle group who have kept it going in my enforced absence. Along with Jan, Andrew became a source of ideas about how to make better learning opportunities for our members. We soon started to pick up on the importance of authentic performance, learning by ear and going to sessions, we must have been in a small minority of parents who spent time and energy trying to encourage our children to come to the pub with us rather than dissuading them from entering licensed premises. We had some early disasters; some pubs were ambivalent about having such young people on their premises and we have been thrown out on at least two occasions.

The fiddle group is now successful beyond my wildest aspirations, thanks to the enthusiasm of its members who have been unkind enough to demonstrate to me how dispensable I was, by going from strength to strength after I suffered a fairly massive cerebral vascular accident or stroke in May 2006. This has prevented me from taking part and to my lasting regret has largely curtailed my musical activities. Initially I had four months in hospital, forcing me to leave what I regarded as my fiddle group to sink or swim. It swam, in fact it broke into the front crawl and positively sprinted.

I am now in a position to elaborate the philosophy of the group, a philosophy which developed through experience and through working with enthusiastic and creative people. I will now attempt to spell out what I now think are the key features of our success. In some ways, but somewhat unkindly, I might say look at what the formal school sector does and do precisely the opposite:-

Formal instrument tuition is embedded within the culture of classical music and has the following features:-

- 1) an emphasis on formal tuition
- 2) an emphasis on reading music
- 3) an emphasis on solitary practice
- 4) the selection of the talented and its inevitable consequence, rejection of the unworthy, justified by apparently limited resources
- 5) highly structured and constrained performance in formal settings
- 6) access to performance groups controlled by auditions
- 7) formal assessment through a graded assessment scheme
- 8) focus on classical music, rooted in a culture not always, or often shared by community
- 9) parents' role to "police" and enforce practice, to make children do something which they did not do themselves.

It's only recently that I have sat down and explicated these features of formal school instrument tuition, and I examine them I am struck by the fact that the fiddle group really does do almost the exact opposite of all these. So that in the fiddle group:

- 1) there is very little formal tuition, members learn by participation and from each other and

from the occasional workshop which is the closest we get to formal tuition. For a long time our strapline has been "Be Your Own Good Teacher", a phrase I got from interviewing a young and now well-known traditional musician for some early research I was carrying out,

2) although we do use staff notation, our colour-coded introductory system and our emphasis on knowing how the tune goes before you try to learn it (through the use of our introductory CDs), we have progressively moved our emphasis to learning and playing by ear. Being able to read music is a useful skill but for traditional music, playing by ear is the norm. If our ceilidh band set up music stands and sat in a formal formation to play it would totally change the character of what they were doing, they invariably stand, or rather dance or jump around, look at each other, and smile or laugh, or sometimes exchange jokes, look at the audience, enjoy themselves as they watch a hall full of people dance to their tune.

3) we use the term "practice" quite differently. For us practice is not the solitary repetition of soul destroying exercises and scales, but is the authentic practice of music and is most often carried out in groups by playing music with friends or peers

4) I am happy to say that we totally reject, and have always rejected the notion of selection. The scarcity of resources is related to the insistence on formal tuition, paying expensively trained tutors means that access to play musical instruments is necessarily limited. Furthermore, selection is based on a notion of inborn musical ability which we just do not share. A crucial part of our ethos and the values that we all share is that anybody can learn to play. Selection is a barrier and we focus on the removal of barriers. Our fundraising activities enable us to loan instruments to anybody who wants to play and our focus on participatory learning means that we do not use our resources on paying for individual tuition

5) performance for us is rooted in the traditional music notion of "having a tune", a concept, unknown in classical music, which means friends gathering together to enjoy playing music as a social activity. Performance is enjoyable and informal, performers are encouraged to tap their feet to engage with others, to exchange smiles and grins to show one another that they're enjoying themselves. Our members get to understand the importance of playing in sessions which means that we have a very high rate of continuation after younger members leave us and go to university and so on. This is not so of formal school instrument tuition, in fact, we have a very low dropout rate throughout. This is to do with the emphasis on fun and enjoyment.

6) performance is open to anybody who wants to take part. This is true even of the ceilidh band where we have to be conscious of quality because we charge significant fees, which are fed back into the group resources, nevertheless membership of the ceilidh band is based on self-selection, anybody who can play the repertoire at the appropriate speed for dancing can join the ceilidh band. This has never given us any problem, the ceilidh band acts as a spur to improvement for our younger members, nobody has ever joined it, who was out of their depth when it came to performing "in anger", so to speak. (For a full description of

how the ceilidh band runs see the BFG Big Ceilidh Book, published by in 2008.)

7) it follows, that we have no need for formal assessment. Members assess themselves, using as a benchmark, their more capable peers and sometimes the performance of professional music groups.

8) our focus is on traditional music, a form of music much appreciated by most communities within Scotland. In practice we have tended to play as much Irish music as Scottish but the two cultures have many connections. Irish traditional musicians tend to play faster, especially reels, and this appeals to the more kamikaze younger members of the group, whilst the old fogeys hang on for grim death, but nevertheless enjoy surviving as they usually do.

9) we are now very clear that we expect parents to participate on an equal footing with their children. This gives them the pleasure of seeing their offspring rapidly outstrip them, slightly frustrating but usually highly rewarding

Oddly enough, this is the first time that I have attempted to lay out our principles and our philosophy and I would welcome comments from group members, but I hope I have made it clear that the philosophy emerged from our practice rather than the other way round. I am grateful to the many musicians with whom I have had the privilege of playing, but I would especially like to mention Ryan Thompson (a.k.a. Captain Fiddle) who took me to so many sessions in New Hampshire and in Boston, and talked with me at great length about learning to play musical instruments, Ryan is a very interesting character who learned to play the fiddle twice, once right-handed and again left-handed. If you're interested in his story, Google "Captain Fiddle", I am also grateful to the Carnegie Trust who funded what turned out to be an enjoyable and informative research trip to the States. Most of all, I am grateful to the members Of Blackford Fiddle Group who took an ill-thought-out and daft idea and made it work. I owe many people thanks for their support since my cerebral vascular accident (stroke) enforced my departure from the fiddle group in 2006. I particularly want to thank those who gave me unconditional help, disabled people want help without judgment. To all the members of the fiddle group, I should finally say keep it going and keep it fun. I am already indescribably proud, sometimes almost to the point that my heart seems to burst with delight at what we have achieved together. To anybody who thinks they would like to do likewise, I would say, go for it. We will help as much as we can, but you have to be prepared to adapt and make it up as you go along. You are more musical and more creative in every way than you think.

Pete Cope November 2008

Tribute to Peter Cope (1948 - 2014)

Pete was a great friend, an inspiration and tireless pursuer of new ideas. One of those ideas was that everyone should be able to learn to participate in music making, even though tests of musical aptitude suggest otherwise. Indeed, as a leading educational academic Pete believed strongly that such tests were at best unreliable. Blackford Fiddle Group (BFG) was at first an experiment to demonstrate what he believed, although right from the start it was something fundamentally more important and more interesting than that. It became a mission which some of us have been lucky enough to join. There is no point in trying to describe the origins of the group, Pete did that in his own words and you can read his short essay above. From 1996 to 2006 Pete was the energy at the centre of the group and the man with the ideas and the drive; he generated momentum, self-belief and made the whole process great fun. Above all I would say the fun element was what has sustained the group and made its members keep coming back year after year. At BFG adults and under 18s alike found something that they could relate to and audiences at nearly 600 gigs have joined the fun; dancing, tapping their feet and clapping.

It is difficult to put one's finger on what made Pete tick. Obsession, the need to prove things, a passion to make things work (and to take them apart if they didn't) and the desire to explain and debate everything, and of course to be right. It could make him a difficult man at times, but his confidence was infectious. We can never know how many reluctant beginners began to play as a result and who now play fiddle for fun and to entertain others. Certainly, there have been hundreds. Seeing Pete standing at the centre of the Blackford Hall on a Friday evening encouraging and cajoling people was the finest start to the weekend. He latched onto or coined many BFG catch-phrases, most of which to the outsider would seem pointed or a little rude - no one was spared. And that was the point, no one was above the rest, everyone played their part in the group, and for many that part included becoming helpers/teachers. There was no reliance on external help because Pete, in his typical way, didn't see why he (and the rest) couldn't just do what was needed. Many parents have remarked that the group has given their children great confidence and many adults would agree that they too have achieved much that they didn't expect to. This all came from playing music with BFG. I'm sure Pete didn't intend for all that to happen, but it is a particular type of person who can turn a good idea into a movement. When BFG started there were few groups of its type, and almost none that welcomed the range of ages and abilities that BFG includes. Today there are many more and setting up a group such as BFG might not be exceptional. But doing it when Pete started certainly was and doing it in the way he did still might be. So we have much to thank Pete for. We have BFG to thank Pete for, and for many of us there are more reasons to thank BFG for than we could describe.

It is interesting to reflect that although Pete was musical, his own fiddle playing was, (and I say this with affection and the certain knowledge that he was far from alone), like that of many other slightly obsessed adult learners, a little unreliable. He extended that to banjo, mandolin and guitar too. I know that shortly before his stroke he was thinking more about how to improve his own playing, to move from good session player to performer

perhaps. This is no doubt that whatever he might have discovered by means of self-experimentation would have ended up as new material to try on others. His desire to understand how people learned and what got in the way was a practical goal as well as an academic one. The thing on which he stumbled perhaps by accident, was that learning in a group really worked if everyone shared a sense of it being their group, however far up the learning curve they still had to go. It needs the right atmosphere, something as far removed from formality as possible without it being entirely chaotic. Of course, that only works if there is also the right sort of leader - which Pete undoubtedly was.

The final thing that Pete taught us was to take nothing for granted. His stroke in May 2006 stripped him of so much that made him what he was. The physical disabilities alone made playing the fiddle impossible. The ability to participate in or to lead the group were just two of the many things Pete lost. A friend and fellow musician asked Pete in early 2006, before his stroke, if he thought the group would carry on if he left. It was almost like a premonition. Pete declined to answer but asked me what I thought. I recall saying that it might but it wouldn't be easy. Looking back, I would refine that - no one person and no group of us could have sustained BFG as it was if they had not experienced at first hand Pete's approach. Of course, for several months after his stroke we harboured the idea that he would be back, but we had underestimated the disadvantages of the physical and mental injuries. He simply didn't want come back on such changed terms.

Over the early years of BFG many of us played with Pete in ceilidhs, in sessions, in pubs, on ferries, in kitchens and stages big and small. The camaraderie, the musical collapses and recoveries were all a source of entertainment and often an excuse for a drink. It was in these events, when Pete was often just one of the crowd, that he seemed at his most comfortable and it is for his company on such occasions as much as anything that I wish to remember him.

Here's to Pete Cope. There really are few like him.

Andrew Bachell. October 2014